

Promoting literacy for adults with intellectual disabilities in a community-based service organisation

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Despite the importance of and advocacy for developing literacy skills for successful and rewarding participation in the community, there remains a common perception that becoming literate is not possible for people with intellectual disabilities. Until recently, limited research has been undertaken to investigate the literacy skills of adults with intellectual disabilities. In particular, research related to opportunities for lifelong learning in community-based organisations, and to the kinds of literacy activities that might be both developmentally and socially appropriate to assist adults with intellectual disabilities to remain active as they age, is limited in relation to older adults with intellectual disabilities. This exploratory project used a range of instruments to gather information about the literacy skills of older adults to identify their literacy needs and wants, and to consider opportunities to enhance and maintain literacy skills existing in an ongoing activity program in one community-based service organisation.

Introduction

The development of literate citizens is considered crucial to the sustainability of a democratic society (Ehrens, Lenz & Deshler 2004). Thus, there have been many government initiatives and policies to advance the literacy learning of a range of groups within society (see MCEETYA 2008; Erickson 2005), recognising that all citizens have the motivation and capability to continue learning and developing literacy throughout life (Kearns 2005). Internationally, UNESCO designated the years 2003 to 2012 as the Decade of Literacy, stating that:

Literacy for all is at the heart of basic education for all [and] creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals or eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy. (UNESCO 2006: 19)

Within this broader social policy context, the role of literacy in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities has been marginalised. Until recently, limited research has been undertaken to investigate the literacy skills of adults with intellectual disabilities as there remains a common perception that becoming literate is not possible for people with intellectual disabilities (Kliewer, Biklen & Kasa-Hendrickson 2006). However, there is now a growing body of research that has reported the continuing literacy development among groups of post-school aged individuals with intellectual disabilities. This research has challenged and refuted generalised educational myths related to the plateaux of learning that were traditionally thought to occur for individuals with intellectual disabilities (e.g. Moni, Jobling & van Kraayenoord 2007; Morgan, Moni & Jobling 2004; Pershey & Gilbert 2002; Young, Moni, Jobling & van Kraayenoord 2004). Findings suggest that individuals with intellectual disabilities can develop literacy skills and that these will continue to develop through adolescence and beyond (e.g. Bochner,

Outhred & Pieterse 2001; Moni & Jobling 2001; van den Bos, Nakken, Nicolay & van Houten 2007). Research has found that literacy has the potential to add significantly to the quality of life of individuals with intellectual disabilities both academically and emotionally, contributing to the development of skills in problem-solving, choice-making and communication which are required for full participation in the community (Ashman & Suttie 1995; van den Bos et al. 2007).

However, while literacy is a lifelong skill that is highly valued in the community, opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to develop literacy across the lifespan are limited in Australian society. Post-school options for individuals with intellectual disabilities focus primarily on work placement and community access through sport and recreational activities, and access to these and to educational opportunities for individuals in adulthood, continues to be very limited (Abells, Burbridge & Minnis 2008; Davis & Beamish 2009; Hart, Gregal & Weir 2010; Rubenson 2002).

Technical And Further Education (TAFE) is the main provider of literacy courses offered for adults with intellectual disabilities (Meadows 2009). However, there is limited evidence that the literacy courses developed by this sector are planned beyond the requirements of basic adult education courses to meet literacy needs, or cater developmentally for the range of skills that adults with intellectual disabilities possess. Thus, individuals with intellectual disabilities who enrol in these courses may not achieve success, or require more support than their non-disabled peers to be successful (Cavallaro, Foley, Saunders & Bowman 2005). The main post-school option open for many adults with intellectual disabilities is to attend activities and programs provided by community-based organisations and small registered training organisations.

While the notion of continued learning is inherent in many of the programs offered by these organisations in terms of learning life

skills to enhance independence, the development of literacy skills that underpin many of these life skills is not evident. In addition, research related to opportunities for lifelong learning in these programs, and to the kinds of literacy activities that might be both developmentally and socially appropriate to assist adults with intellectual disabilities to remain active as they age, is particularly limited in relation to older adults with intellectual disabilities (Boulton-Lewis, Buys & Tedman-Jones 2008).

This exploratory project was developed to gather information about the literacy skills of older adults to identify their literacy needs and interests, and to consider opportunities to enhance and maintain literacy skills existing in an ongoing activity program in one community-based service organisation.

The project

The aims of the project were, first, to assess the literacy abilities and interests of the clients attending programs in a community-based service organisation, and second, to identify opportunities that might exist in the activities provided for continued literacy development within current programs.

The project gathered data about the literacy abilities of a group of older adults with intellectual disabilities who accessed activity centres provided by a large community support organisation in Queensland, Australia. These centres provide a range of daytime training and recreational activities for adults with intellectual disabilities. The project was conducted over a two-month period. During preliminary meetings with organisation staff to discuss the nature of the project and its aims, the scope of the project and the requirements for staff and clients were explained, and subsequently two Activity Centre managers, two support staff and 13 clients aged between 29 and 56 agreed to be involved with the project.

After ethical clearance was granted, letters of consent were sent to the two Centre managers and a conference call was arranged to explain the project, after which the managers were asked to distribute the material on the project and letters of consent to interested staff and clients. Informed consent was obtained from both the clients and, where appropriate, their care-givers.

Data collection instruments

The data collection instruments for the project were selected to collect data about the literacy abilities and interests of the clients and also to collect data about the literacy environment of the Centre and its existing literacy practices. They comprised both formal standardised literacy assessments and informal, qualitative instruments.

Formal assessments

The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-111A (PPVT-III A) (Dunn & Dunn 1997) was used to determine the receptive oral language age equivalent of clients. This standardised test is a test of listening comprehension for the spoken word. It is an individually administered, un-timed and norm-referenced test, designed for ages 2.5 to 90+ years. The test presents a raw score that can be scaled into an age equivalent score.

The Neale Analysis of Reading—3rd edition (NARA) (Neale 1999) was used to assess the accuracy, comprehension and rate of clients' reading on a series of levelled texts. This standardised assessment has been used successfully in a post-school literacy program with younger clients (Moni & Jobling 2001).

The Neale Analysis of Reading—3rd edition—Diagnostic Tutor (Neale 1999) was used with those clients who were unable to attain base-line levels on the *NARA* to attain data about their skills in phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, auditory discrimination and blending.

Informal assessments

Concepts About Print Test (Clay 1979) was used to assess clients' knowledge of reading behaviour (such as knowledge of parts of a book, reading directionality, knowledge of letters, words and punctuation). This simply administered assessment is user friendly and enables the assessor to collect information on reading behaviour.

A *writing sample* was collected from each client with the use of a concrete prompt in the form of a personal photo. The researcher encouraged the client to talk about the photo, the occasion, and the people in the photo and then to write down their verbal responses. Clients were asked to write as many words as they could, and in some cases assistance was given with spelling and writing words for the clients to copy. There was no time limit. The sample was then scored using the Clay (1979) scoring for writing behaviour.

A *literacy interest survey* (Gunn, Young & van Kraayenoord 1992) was undertaken using a conversational style of administration. The assessor talked to the clients about the print types that they may like to read using the survey items as a guide. All items on the survey were discussed.

Centre assessments

For each Centre, three instruments were used to gather information about the environment in which the clients spent their day. Specifically, information was gathered about the environment for literacy and the opportunities for interactions around literacy as well as staff perceptions.

An *Environment Literacy Audit* (Moni, Jobling & van Kraayenoord 2002) was used by the researchers to collate the text types available (e.g. magazines, posters, manuals) in a particular location of the Centre as well as the accessibility, readability of those text types and number of literacy opportunities for clients to access such texts.

Semi-structured staff interviews were undertaken to gain information about the clients at the Centre and the literacy environment created for them. These interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Themes around the interview questions were formulated using inductive coding.

Observations of the context in which literacy activities could take place were examined in each Centre across two of the daily activity sessions. It was anticipated that these observations would help the research team to understand more fully the context and operation of the existing programs.

Procedure

Two Activity Centres volunteered to participate in the project. There were eight consenting clients from one Centre and five from the other. Staff involvement and consent was also obtained from two staff members from each centre who volunteered to be interviewed.

Two researchers visited each of the Centres on three mornings to collect data. Staff and observational data were collected before the client data. This was done to familiarise the clients with our presence in the centre prior to being required to interact with the researchers. On the first visit, the researchers interviewed the two staff members. Staff interviews took place in a quiet room away from the general activity of the Centre. One staff member at each Centre was the Centre manager. Data from an environmental literacy audit and opportunities for literacy from observations of two activity sessions were collected. Each researcher observed one activity session. These were undertaken to ascertain the accessibility and readability of text types available to the clients at each centre. On the second and third visits, the client assessments were undertaken. The assessments were conducted individually in a quiet room. All clients co-operated well with the researchers during the assessments.

Results

There were a total of 13 clients (eight from Centre 1 and five from Centre 2) ranging in age from 29 to 56 years. Six clients were female and seven were male. The clients at the two Centres lived mainly in the northern and southern suburbs of Brisbane and there was a range of ethnic backgrounds (Greek, Italian and Aboriginal). The level of independence in travel to the Centres varied, with Centre 1 having six clients and Centre 2 18 clients who travelled independently on public transport. At Centre 2, most clients lived at home, and were of middle class status, while at Centre 1 there were a range of living arrangements and these were mainly the family home and supported accommodation service. Socio-economic status was also mixed.

Results of standardised assessments of clients from Centre 1

Five clients were selected by Centre managers at Centre 1 for participation in initial assessments. The results from these assessments are reported below.

Table 1: PPVT–III A (Dunn & Dunn, 1997) Initial Assessment Results

Client	Age (years and months)	Raw score	Age equivalent score (years and months)
Mandy	38.10	124	9.05
Frank	32.00	49	2.07
Kay	30.07	88	6.06
Stanley	32.08	81	6.01
Isobel	40.06	74	5.07

Note: All names are pseudonyms

The results in Table 1 show that the raw scores for the five clients from the *PPVT IIIA* ranged from 49 to 124. Their age equivalent scores for receptive oral language ranged from 2 years 7 months to 9 years 5 months, which were well below their chronological ages.

Table 2: Neale Analysis of Reading—3rd ed. (NARA) (Neale, 1999) Initial Assessment Age Equivalent Results

Client	Age (years and months)	Accuracy (years and months)	Comp (years and months)	Rate (years and months)
Mandy	38.10	9.07	8.09	8.01
Frank	32.00	6.00	6.02	6.05
Kay	30.07	7.05	7.04	7.04
Stanley	32.08	11.09	8.09	12.06
Isobel	40.06	6.02	-	6.08

The results in Table 2 show that the five clients ranged in age from 32 years to 40 years 6 months. All five clients attained age equivalent scores for accuracy and rate, with four clients (Mandy, Frank, Kay and Stanley) also attaining age equivalent scores for comprehension. The age equivalent scores for accuracy ranged from 6 years to 11 years 9 months. The scores for comprehension ranged from 6 years 2 months to 8 years 9 months, while the age equivalent scores for rate ranged from 6 years 5 months to 12 years 6 months. All of the reading age equivalent scores attained by the clients on this assessment were well below their chronological ages.

As all of the clients reached baseline on this assessment, *The Neale Analysis of Reading—3rd edition—Diagnostic Tutor* was not administered.

Results of standardised assessments of clients from Centre 2

Eight clients were selected by Centre managers at Centre 2 for participation in initial assessments. The results from these assessments are reported below.

Table 3: PPVT—III A (Dunn & Dunn, 1997) Initial Assessment Results

Client	Age (years and months)	Raw score	Age equivalent scores (years and months)
Betty	51.09	104	7.08
Bob	41.00	94	7.00
George	33.07	101	7.05
Ian	50.03	96	7.01
Louise	29.03	102	7.06
Michael	44.04	70	5.04
Simon	32.00	75	5.08
Wendy	56.00	56	5.05

The results in Table 3 show that the raw scores for the eight clients from the *PPVT IIIA* ranged from 56 to 104. Their age equivalent scores for receptive oral language ranged from 5 years 5 months to 7 years 8 months, which were well below their chronological ages.

*Table 4: Neale Analysis of Reading—3rd ed. (NARA) (Neale, 1999)
Initial Assessment Age Equivalent Results*

Name	Age (years and months)	Accuracy (years and months)	Comp (years and months)	Rate (years and months)
Betty	51.09	9.06	8.09	8.05
Bob	41.00	-	-	-
George	33.07	7.10	7.02	8.00
Ian	50.03	-	-	-
Louise	29.03	8.05	7.04	8.01
Michael	44.04	-	-	-
Simon	32.00	-	-	-
Wendy	56.00	6.02	-	8.08

The results in Table 4 show that the eight clients ranged in age from 29 years 3 months to 56 years. Four of the clients (Betty, George, Louise and Wendy) attained age equivalent scores for reading accuracy and rate, and three of the clients (Betty, George and Louise) also attained age equivalent scores for comprehension. The scores for accuracy ranged from 6 years 2 months to 9 years 6 months. Age equivalent scores for comprehension ranged from 7 years 2 months to 8 years 9 months, while the age equivalent scores for rate ranged from 8 years to 8 years 8 months. Betty achieved a reading age equivalent of 9 years 6 months for accuracy, 8 years 9 months for comprehension and 8 years 5 months for rate. George achieved a reading age equivalent of 7 years 10 months for accuracy, 7 years 2 months for comprehension and 8 years for rate. Louise's reading age equivalent was 8 years 5 months for accuracy, 7 years 4 months for comprehension and 8 years 1 month for rate. Wendy achieved a reading age equivalent of 6 years 2 months for accuracy, and

8 years 8 months for rate. She did not attain base-line levels for comprehension. All of the reading age equivalent scores attained by the clients on this assessment were well below their chronological ages.

The remaining four clients (Bob, Ian, Michael and Simon) did not reach base-line levels for accuracy, comprehension or rate on this assessment and thus *The Neale Analysis of Reading—3rd edition—Diagnostic Tutor* was administered. These results are reported below.

Results from The Neale Analysis of Reading—3rd edition—Diagnostic Tutor

Bob

Bob had limited phonemic awareness skills. He could name most of the letters of the alphabet, recognising both lower and upper case. He showed confusion between the lower case letters b, d and q. His spelling, auditory discrimination and blending skills were limited.

Ian

Ian had limited skills in phonemic awareness, letter recognition in both lower and upper case, spelling, auditory discrimination and blending.

Michael

Michael had limited skills in phonemic awareness, letter recognition in both lower and upper case, spelling, auditory discrimination and blending.

Simon

Simon had some skills of phonemic awareness, particularly with initial letter sounds. He could recognise and name most of the letters of the alphabet in both lower and upper case but his knowledge of letter sounds was limited. His skills in spelling were limited and he experienced difficulty understanding the meaning of same and different and thus his results on the test of auditory discrimination and blending were inconclusive.

Results from informal assessments of clients from both Centres

Informal assessments were also undertaken with all participating clients administered at both Centres.

Concepts About Print Test. The results from this assessment showed that most clients understood how to read a book (Betty, aged 51, for example, fluently, accurately and prosodically read the whole text)—the parts of a book and the directionality of the print. However, most of the clients had limited letter/sound recognition, and limited knowledge of the purpose of capital letters or punctuation.

The *writing samples* were scored using the Clay (1979) scoring system. Scores ranging from 1 to 4 indicate that the writing content is not yet satisfactory, while scores of 5 to 6 indicate that the writing is satisfactory for the three areas assessed—language level, message quality and directional principles. Most clients attained scores from 1 to 4; however, all were able to recall and retell events depicted in a photograph. For example, George (aged 30) began to write using a picture of his dog as a prompt:

‘I love my German Shepherd. They nice dogs.’

Then he changed his story and continued to write independently, without a prompt, about his cousin. George printed his text in capitals and his writing sample is reproduced below.

TO MY COUSIN SOPHIE
FROM GEORGE
SHE LOOK BEAUTIFUL
NICE LADY
HER HAIR BLACK BLACK HAIR
SOPHIE HAIR WAS CURLY HAIR
I GOT A PHOTO OF SOPHIE

The clients were also motivated to write. Betty, for example, hand wrote a response to one of the interview questions without further prompting, and in cursive writing. This is reproduced verbatim below:

I enjoy reading, writing and sewing and going out shopping.
I used to do tapestry but just recently I have another job putting names on peoples clothes and am going to get paid for it.

Some clients demonstrated some knowledge of spelling but most had limited knowledge of punctuation. The correct use of upper and lower case letters in their writing was mixed and two clients (including George) wrote using only upper case. Only Betty used cursive writing, while all others printed.

The literacy interest survey revealed that there was a range of literacy interests. Magazines such as the *Australian Women's Weekly*, DVD labels, TV guides, menus from fast food restaurants such as *McDonalds*, recipes and bowling score-sheets were the items which most clients cited as their reading interest. Engagement with their interests in these texts could be built on and be incorporated into their daily activities.

The context for literacy at the Centres

The context and opportunities for literacy activities in the Centres were observed and recorded by two project staff. Observational data varied between each Centre. An environmental audit was conducted in the games room, the main room and the sewing room.

Environmental literacy audit

In both Centres, the print displayed was primarily multi-purpose materials such as fire-drill procedures, disability posters and notices about workplace practices. There were displays at each Centre's entrance. These comprised a combination of pictures (some photos) and text. They were interesting and engaging but not readily accessible for the clients, with the language used being too difficult

for most of the clients to read and understand. At each Centre, the environmental print was somewhat disorganised and predominantly above the literacy levels and interests of the clients. Some items were of particular client interest, such as items about recent trips or events. However, their relevance and access for literacy were limited. For example, in Centre 1, while there was a display that was in accessible language in the designated sewing room, the clients only had access to this room on Tuesdays and under supervision, and recipe books in the kitchen in Centre 1 were labelled 'For staff'. In Centre 2, instructions in the designated literacy room were beyond clients' literacy levels, and a poster of tenpin bowling scores, that featured some of the clients, was two years out of date.

Semi-structured staff interviews

The two staff members who were interviewed at each Centre reported that the clients could participate in a wide range of activities that were offered across the week. These included craft (wood and painting), cooking, recreational activities such as bowling, golf and swimming, music once a week, and a significant level of community access to concerts, shopping centres, and meals on wheels. However, the manager of Centre 2 believed that at times it was a logistical problem organising 31 people into 50 activities over 5 days.

Both Centres had a work preparation program that operated within the Centre. One Centre shredded paper for recycling, while the other Centre prepared newspapers for delivery.

At Centre 1, the staff (manager and one other staff member) discussed some specific aspects of their Centre and its program. The staff reported that their clients enjoyed literacy activities, especially writing their name, but felt that had only limited literacy skills. For example, the support worker said: "*No-one can read ... they know letters and can recognise their name and a few words*". The clients enjoyed rugby league, a range of television programs that included soap

operas, with other interests including food and birthday celebrations. Some individual work on writing and word recognition (15 minutes per week) was undertaken with a small group of clients who worked with a volunteer. When asked about computer skills, they believed that the clients had limited skills but were enthusiastic about learning more. Staff reported that all clients could recognise their names but experienced difficulty writing their own names. They felt that for many clients, learning to write their own name would be seen by them as 'a grand achievement' (staff member A, Centre 1).

Weekly activities were mainly vocational or recreational, for example, spending a day playing putt-putt golf, lawn bowls and general shopping for a weekly barbeque. Community outings occurred every fortnight and clients chose the locations for these outings.

When asked to consider what parts of the program could include literacy activities, the two staff members suggested shopping, library, workplace health and safety, and cooking. Activities suggested were using computers, oral and written communication across a range of contexts, and reading. However, none of these activities were included in the program schedules in either Centre.

At Centre 2, the staff (manager and one other staff member) reported some specific aspects of their Centre and its program. Indoor bowling was a favourite regular activity and other regular community access activities included shopping, attending concerts, golf, lawn bowls and aged care. Art programs were also popular. Some clients accessed the community for work trials and two females attended work placement in hairdressing salons. The staff planned the activities to include 50% learning and 50% leisure. The manager reported that literacy was included for the purposes of obtaining funding. This Centre has a partnership with a TAFE college and two days per week TAFE staff attend during the school term to conduct sewing and woodwork classes with the clients. A competency-based assessment is used with the clients as per TAFE requirements.

Support staff encouraged the clients to choose their activities and set their own goals for activities each year. This frequently informed the program content, however the logistics of catering for individual choices was difficult to overcome. This process and the format of the day, which was similar to that of a school day, has been the same for 10 years.

The literacy interests of the clients comprised viewing TV programs such as *Prisoner*, watching sport, listening to music CDs and watching DVDs. With regard to watching TV programs, one staff member commented:

We have five or six clients who are obsessed by *Prisoner*. It is a fun obsession for them. They realise it is a funny show because of the way things happen in it and they obviously realise it is not real. (staff member C, Centre 2)

To further the literacy aspects of the Centre, a play station was recently purchased. Staff reported: 'It is just fantastic. They get more exercise in front of that than they do at gym' (staff member B, Centre 2). The Centre used board games, bingo, measurement and reading recipes in the cooking program. Computers at the centre were also used for story writing. The clients usually typed their stories and 'just use lots of words'. One client had a particular interest in writing stories and wanted to publish them. When asked about the abilities of the clients in their Centre, interviewed staff reported that reading was one of the aspects of literacy to which clients were drawn. While staff considered their clients to be capable, independent, tolerant and sociable with each other, some problem behaviours were also observed.

Discussion

Findings from this study demonstrated that these clients in two community-based service facilities, who are well beyond school age, had an interest in literacy and its associated activities as well as a

range of basic literacy skills that potentially could be developed. Their skills in reading, for example, based on the different forms of the *NARA* (1999) ranged from emergent to primary school levels of comprehension. In addition, interviews and writing samples revealed that these clients were interested in writing, and had reasons to write, demonstrating abilities to write independently about familiar topics and experiences that were relevant to them. These findings support those of previous research that older adults with intellectual disabilities are engaged in literacy activities and are enthusiastic and interested in improving their skills (Boulton-Lewis, Buys & Tedman-Jones 2008). However, literacy development and associated literacy activities were not highly valued in the programs offered at the Centres. Literacy was considered to be something that was useful to include at a rudimentary level (15 minutes per week), and as way to leverage external funding.

Evidence gathered from the environmental and literacy audits and interviews revealed that displays were above the literacy levels of the clients, disorganised and staff oriented. This represents a lost opportunity to create an environment where literacy is valued and accessible, and where clients can participate in activities that incorporate literacy within current programs. More explicit inclusion of literacy materials into current activities and into the environment, for example, by providing more accessible texts, would provide more opportunities for clients to share ideas, writing and experiences through use of existing displays and photo boards. These displays could potentially provide a ready opportunity for the clients to recall, read and write about the trip or event that could easily be integrated into the current program.

Staff in both Centres commented that they did not believe that their clients had many literacy skills and had low expectations for their development. For example, they recognised and acknowledged their

clients' interests in literacy, but perpetuated the traditional view of life skills as being recreational and vocational.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that community-based organisations could be doing more within their current structures and programs to support the maintenance and development of literacy skills. For many years, the training of functional skills for independent living such as cooking and employment have dominated community programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities, with limited recognition of the role literacy can contribute to these programs and to quality of life through ongoing learning. This case study of one community-based service organisation has provided evidence that there are opportunities for community-based service providers to move beyond advocacy towards the introduction of literacy activities based on the needs and interests of learners that have the potential to enrich clients' experiences of community-based service organisations.

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